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USM Faculty Senate

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An Open Letter to President Shelby F. Thames from the Faculty Senate

January 31, 2003

In a January 25, 2003 story in the *Clarion-Ledger*, a spokesperson for the USM administration acknowledged that the Faculty Senate is the elected faculty governing body at USM. The Faculty Senate was established to provide a forum for faculty and others to discuss and debate ideas and issues that affect the university and its people. From the Senate's inception until the time you became president, it was understood that faculty and staff should have input into major changes at the university. Successful and sustainable changes result from the efforts of faculty, staff, and other stakeholders who are partners in shaping the changes and in implementing them.

In the aftermath of your January 17 restructuring announcement, there has been much conversation across the campus community about decisions you have made since you became president. On Friday, January 31, members of the Faculty Senate voted to send this open letter to you to convey our collective position about decisions you have made that are of deep concern to us and to those we represent. We focus our attention on several prominent examples and offer related commentary.

Your decision to fill at least eight senior administrative positions in summer 2002 without any formal searches and in absence of input from faculty and staff is a marked departure from what should occur at a university with the stature of USM. Your decision to implement a massive academic restructuring without input from Faculty Senate, faculty in general, staff, students, or representatives of units that will be affected is fully out of step with a commitment to inclusion and with what our campus community has a right to expect from its top leadership team. There's too much expertise among the faculty to be ignored by you and your provosts.

We join with others in expressing our distress over your treatment of the deans. It was inappropriate to inform people outside the university about the termination of deans as administrators the night before deans were told. Further, to surprise deans with the news just moments before your public announcement on restructuring marginalizes the commitments and contributions that these academic leaders have made to our university. Teamwork and trust were severely compromised by you and your provosts when you decided to treat the deans in the manner you did.

Beyond expressing our deep concerns about decisions you are making and about involving only the few in determining major decisions that affect the many, we hope this open letter will achieve more. We urge you and your provosts to reconsider parts of the restructuring framework. We urge you and your provosts to provide opportunities for reactions and responses to the restructuring framework, and to listen to the input. We suggest that a specific calendar for restructuring be developed that includes a time frame for input, a process by which that input will be digested, and feedback loops. We also urge you and your provosts to provide specific detail on your estimates of projected cost savings from restructuring and detail on the \$278,000 in savings that you have said have already been achieved at senior administrative levels.

Shortly after the IHL Board of Trustees appointed you as president of USM, a *Hattiesburg American* editorial contained the statement, "*For Thames to succeed as president, he needs to establish immediate rapport with the campus community. Moreover, he needs to demonstrate that he possesses the interpersonal skills required of a university president.*" Part of a January 26, 2003 *Hattiesburg American* editorial reads, "*Unfortunately, the manner in which Thames has handled the reorganization effort has further fractured a university campus that was, in some respects, already demoralized and divided*". The editorial continues, "*The process begs the question: Does Thames respect university employees? Does he truly value their input?*" Mr. President, the evidence to date strongly suggests you are in danger of further

fracturing and demoralizing the campus community, and that you and your provosts do not value input. Low morale can accelerate loss of faculty, whereas good communication promotes better morale and commitment to the institution.

A statement from the June 1999 USM strategic plan reads, “*Good communication is a key to building community, and the university should use every vehicle at its disposal to facilitate communication.*” We ask that you begin the process of making respect, trust, and inclusion pillars of your administration through an intensive effort to communicate with faculty and staff. The Faculty Senate needs to be a partner in rebuilding respect, trust, inclusion, and morale at our university. For us not to be involved will hamper this university, yours and ours, in its efforts to build on distinguished achievements and move forward for the future.

We look forward to your timely response.